

Understand and Ride Using the Natural Aids

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The natural aids are the best tools the rider has to communicate with the horse. Traditionally, there are four natural aids, the seat (weight), the legs, the hands and the voice of the rider. I prefer to teach rider's that there are actually seven natural aids; in addition to the traditional four aids, you should also use your eyes, your breathing and your brain. When all of these aids are used together, you'll give clear and consistent signals to your horse and you'll use your whole body naturally to give the correct cue.

No single aid gives a cue to the horse (you do not stop by pulling on the reins or go by kicking), but all the aids working together will guide the horse toward the appropriate response. In addition to your seat, legs and hands, you'll use your eyes to direct the horse where you want him to go; your breathing will cue the horse to slow down and speed up, inhaling when you ask the horse for more speed and exhaling when you cue the horse to slow; and using your brain to learn how to think like a horse instead of a human will help you make the right response. You want to learn to use all seven of your natural aids all of the time, but you'll use your primary natural aids the most—your seat, legs and hands. All of the natural aids should be used in a connected and coordinated fashion and should always originate from the use of the most important aid, the seat.

For instance, asking the horse to stop or slow down is not simply a matter of pulling back on the reins. To ask the horse to stop using all of your aids in a connected fashion, first you must drop your weight onto the horse's back by opening and relaxing your pelvis and plugging your seat bones into the saddle. As your seat drops down and back, connect your elbows to your hips and your shift of weight back will cause an increase of pressure on the horse's mouth through your arms, hands and reins. In other words, the pressure the horse feels on his mouth is connected to the increased weight on his back and the pull comes from the rider's entire body, not just from the hands. When your seat engages, your lower legs will naturally relax on the horse's sides, reinforcing that you are no longer asking for movement.

You can see how this feels by sitting in a chair pulled up to a table or desk. With both feet flat on the floor and sitting up straight, put both hands on the edge of the table. As you exhale and rotate your seat bones down and forward (moving your hips back and opening the pelvis joint and plugging your seat bones into the chair), pull on the edge of the table so that your seat bones get even heavier on the chair. This is how you cue the horse to stop or slow down by using your weight aid first. You should feel a connection from your arms to your seat bones, as they press into the chair. If your seat bones lighten and your upper body moves forward when you pull back on the reins, your aids are not connected. Practice this exercise until you feel the connection between your seat and hands, and then try to feel the connection on a horse.

By the way, any horse in the world can be trained to stop off the weight/seat aid, without any use of the reins at all. No horse wants you to pull on his mouth (remember there's a metal bar across his tongue) and all horses want to stop. Even hot-blooded, forward horses don't really want to canter around the arena with you on their back. Don't you

think it makes sense that if a horse *knew* a cue to stop *other* than pulling on his mouth, he would gladly respond? Few riders give their horses that opportunity; riders almost always go to reins *first* in the stop cue. If you can convince your horse that you will always use your seat first to slow or stop and that you will *only* use your hands as a reinforcement *after* you have given him ample opportunity to respond to the seat, he will happily stop or slow on your seat cue every time.

For riders learning to use the aids in a connected fashion to stop and go, I teach the “gears of the seat,” neutral, forward and reverse. Neutral gear is sitting straight up over your seat bones in a relaxed and balanced position with your center of gravity right over the horse’s and your lower back flat, with ear-shoulder-hip-heel alignment. Neutral gear tells the horse to keep doing what he is doing until you tell him something different. You should ride in neutral gear almost all the time.

To ask the horse to speed up, use forward gear by inhaling, shifting your center slightly forward (a clear signal to the horse to move forward); at the same time allowing your arms to move forward give a release to his mouth and your legs to fall slightly back, closing on the horse’s sides and asking him to move forward. Forward gear is a motion similar to the very first motion you would make to get up out of a chair, but without your seat ever losing contact. Come immediately back to neutral gear as the horse responds.

Stopping the horse correctly, using your seat first, is the most difficult for riders. The aids are reversed to ask the horse to stop or slow down. To shift into reverse gear, exhale, shift your center of gravity slightly back, opening your pelvis, rounding your lower back and sinking your seat bones into the horse’s back. As you shift into reverse gear, your arms come slightly back and up, closing the front door for the horse; your legs relax on the horse’s sides, moving slightly forward. Again, come immediately back to neutral as soon as your horse begins to respond.

As a rider progresses, the rein aids and leg aids become more articulate to control different parts of the horse’s body for turning and more refined and controlled movements. The rider’s hands control the horse from the withers forward, but the seat, legs and hands together control the horse’s body from the withers back to his tail.

To simplify the use of the leg aids, I teach that there are three leg positions, using the terminology forward, middle and back. The middle leg position is when the rider’s leg hangs straight down, close to the horse’s sides, in the balanced position with ear-shoulder-hip and heel in alignment. Light pressure on the horse’s side at the middle leg position will cause the horse to move his rib cage away from the pressure. This would be useful when asking the horse to arc his body and bend in a circle, as the rib cage moves out, the shoulder and hip bend into the circle.

The forward leg position is applied by reaching toward the girth with your calf. I find it easiest to apply forward leg cues by twisting my lower leg, turning my toes out and allowing my heel to come toward the girth or cinch. Pressure from one leg at the forward position will move the horse’s shoulder away from the pressure or ask him to bend in the shoulder. When horses turn, they prefer to lean into the turn like a bicycle, thus dropping the shoulder and lurching onto the forehand. Light pressure with the forward leg position,

along with a slight lift of the inside rein, will ask the horse to keep his shoulder up and bend properly in the turn.

The back leg aid is applied when the rider's leg shifts back a few inches behind the middle position and it will ask the horse to move his hip away from the pressure. Again, this leg aid might be used in turning and bending the horse, to keep his hip in toward the center of the circle in order to be properly bent. Good hip control is also important for leads and lead changes and more advanced movements such as leg yielding (two-tracking) or side passing.

Leg aids work together but the rider might be using each leg in a separate position. For instance, if you are using the forward leg position with your inside leg to achieve an arcing turn, your outside leg would be in the back position to also keep the horse's hip in place. An ancient saying in horsemanship is that the inside leg gives impulsion and the outside leg gives direction. In other words, the inside leg is the gas pedal and the outside leg is the steering wheel.

To control the horse's entire body, the rider must be able to control the horse's nose, the shoulder, the barrel, the hip and the feet. While the hands control the nose of the horse, the leg and rein aids work together to control the shoulder, barrel and hip. Experiment with applying a light pulsating pressure with one leg in either the forward, neutral or back positions and feel how the horse will yield that part of his body to the pressure.

To use all of the aids in a connected fashion to ask the horse to turn, you must first look in the direction of the turn and use your eyes and body to initiate the turn. As you turn your head slightly to look in the direction of the turn, keep your chin in alignment with your chest so that your shoulders open, swiveling slightly in your hips and shifting your weight to your outside seat bone, maximizing the cue from your body. Again, your legs and hands will follow the movement of your seat and not act independently. Your outside leg will naturally sink down and close on your horse's side, shutting the door to the outside.

Conversely, your inside seat bone and leg will lift up slightly as the inside of your horse's back lifts, opening the door to the inside and keeping the horse's inside shoulder elevated in an arcing turn. As your seat swivels slightly on the horse's back, your elbows, arms and shoulders will follow (make sure your upper arms have a connection with your ribcage), giving a release with the outside rein and increased pressure to the inside rein, thus supporting the horse's head, neck and shoulders in the turn.

Using your whole body to communicate with the horse and having all of the aids give the same signal to the horse, is a very effective way to communicate with the horse and results in invisible cues and seamless transitions.

For more information on improving rider skill, see *Goodnight's Principles of Riding, Volumes 1-5* DVD series as well as *Private Lessons from Julie Goodnight* audio series complete with mounted workouts for you or your students. www.JulieGoodnight.com or 800-225-8827.